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**COMMUNICATING CLEARLY**  
**Differentiating the Operational and Strategic Levels of Strategic Communication**

by

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**A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.**

**The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.**

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**27 October 2010**

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## **Abstract**

Strategic communication is an essential tool for achieving national objectives in peacetime and in war. The military, diplomatic and academic communities continue to struggle to define strategic communication. Four characteristics that differentiate strategic communications at the operational and strategic levels are: the extent to which the engagement is in reaction to a precipitating event or at the initiative of the communicator; the duration of the engagement; whether the target of the engagement is to change audience analysis or to change the audience's analytic framework; and whether the engagement implies reflexivity, i.e., a need or potential for behavioral change by the communicator as well as the audience. Identifying characteristics that differentiate between strategic communication at the operational and strategic levels, and incorporating them into the analysis of problems and operational plans, will help operational planners to distinguish between the two levels, determine whether chosen objectives are more appropriately categorized as operational or strategic, select tactics appropriate to the operational environment and the chosen objective, and establish correct expectations for success of a communication plan.

## INTRODUCTION

Strategic communication is an essential tool for achieving national objectives, in both peacetime and war. The character of the current operational environment – increasing in complexity and in the numbers of wicked problems confronting planners – applies no less to strategic communication than any other aspect of warfare. The military, diplomatic and academic communities continue to struggle to define strategic communication; to identify what differentiates strategic communication at the tactical, operational and strategic levels; and to distinguish strategic communication from public diplomacy. Senior military and national leaders have expressed dissatisfaction with the robustness of the doctrinal definition of strategic communication, “focused U.S. Government efforts to understand and engage key audiences in order to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement of U.S. Government interests, policies and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages, and products synchronized with the actions of all instruments of national power.”<sup>i</sup> Doctrine supporting the definition is incomplete and heavily tactical. The *Commander's Handbook for Strategic Communication and Communication Strategy*, developed by Joint Forces Command, acknowledges this deficit, stating that it is “not approved doctrine, but...a non-authoritative supplement to **currently limited** strategic communication doctrine.”<sup>ii</sup> [emphasis added]

Criteria that differentiate between strategic communication at the operational and strategic levels will help operational practitioners distinguish between the two levels; determine whether communication objectives are more appropriately categorized as operational or strategic, select tactics appropriate to the operational environment and the communication plan objective, and establish correct expectations for success of a

communication plan. Such criteria would help operational planners designing communication plans at the operational and theatre-strategic level. They would assist joint staff, joint planners, joint task force commanders and combatant commanders to evaluate the robustness of those communication plans. Four characteristics that differentiate strategic communications at the operational and strategic levels are:

- **Precipitating event**: at the operational level, audience engagement is often a reaction to an event or accusation; at the strategic level, the practitioner takes increasingly more initiative to initiate communication for its own sake.
- **Duration**: at the operational level, engagement is generally connected to a single operation or campaign; at the strategic level, the duration of the engagement is longer, frequently indefinite, and not tied to a specific campaign or timeframe.
- **Target**: at the operational level, engagements are principally focused on providing information designed to lead the audience to desired, different or corrected conclusions; at the strategic level, the audience is encouraged to change the analytic framework that is used to process that information.
- **Reflexiveness**: at the operational level, the primary objective is to cause the audience to change its assessment of the communicator's behavior; at the strategic end of the spectrum, communication becomes increasingly more about evaluating the communicator's behavior and credibility, instead of simply the accuracy of his messages. This may reveal gaps between actions and messages, and may encourage, or even require, behavioral change by both communicator and audience.

## COUNTERARGUMENTS

Arguments that a distinction cannot be made between the operational and strategic levels of strategic communication, or that such a distinction is not useful to operational planning, are not persuasive. Military leaders, civilian leaders, and academics alike, are openly and assertively dissatisfied with a current lack of definitional and doctrinal clarity. Efforts to deploy strategic communication without sufficient attention to matching objectives, tactics and levels have produced unintended or perverse results and failed to achieve the outcomes desired.

Two case studies that will figure prominently in the discussion ahead fall into the logical fallacy of implying that a collection of tactical or tactical-operational level actions constitutes a strategy. These are ultimately less effective as solutions than differentiating operational and strategic levels of strategic communications and treating them differently. Collections of tactics in individual operations without synchronization and conceptual coherence across operations and campaigns are not a strategy, whether they are military tactics such as armored maneuver, ship movements and amphibious landings, or communication tactics such as media engagement and pamphleteering.

Using cultural elements to resolve shortcomings in doctrine and practice leaves questions unresolved. Dennis M. Murphy and Christopher Paul suggest that understanding foreign cultures will improve the effectiveness of strategic communication.<sup>iii</sup> Kristen Lord suggests that urging audiences to adopt elements of our own culture may be effective and useful.<sup>iv</sup> Cultural understanding has an important role, but does not address key issues of credibility and reflexiveness – the willingness of the communicator not just to hear, but also to change. Murphy’s own discussion refers to duration as an essential component of cultural engagement. Lord’s recommendation that we urge the audience to adopt elements of our culture does not address the true basis of credibility: how well we live up to our standards, not how readily we can convince others to adopt them. Worse, the effort risks insulting the audience we seek to engage by implying cultural superiority.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Case Studies in Operational Strategic Communication**

In a 2007 article in *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Admiral James G. Stavridis, Commander of United States Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM), offered two case studies in strategic

communication. The first concerned public outcry over the use of restraint chairs to force feed detainees engaged in a hunger strike at the Guantanamo Bay detention facility in 2005, and assertions that use of the chairs constituted torture. USSOUTHCOM's response focused on demonstrating that the use of the chairs was not torture, and that the United States in this instance was not covering up alleged application of torture. In the second case, joint operations with Dominican Republic armed forces to build medical clinics and dig wells, a poorly executed communication plan led to belief that the United States was engaged in something other than a humanitarian mission. USSOUTHCOM's response focused on challenging the accuracy of the accusation by demonstrating U.S. actions and arguing that they were, in fact, consistent with a humanitarian mission.<sup>v</sup>

An article in the Fall 2008 issue of the *Joint Center for Operational Analysis (JCOA) Journal*, entitled "Strategic Communication," by Colonels Monte Dunard (USMCR) and Richard Flatau (USMC), Captain Patrick Lorge (USN), and Lieutenant Colonel Dexter Sapinoso (USAF), offered an additional case study concerning responses to the 2004 revelations of torture at Abu Ghraib Prison in Iraq. In specific, the authors described efforts by President George W. Bush and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to set the record straight on detainee torture. The President went to "several Arab media outlets" and the Secretary of Defense testified before Congress, "to restate the strategic message and contain the damage that was caused..."<sup>vi</sup> Additionally, the President, during a press conference with the King of Jordan, said that he regretted that people seeing the pictures from Abu Ghraib did not "understand the true nature and heart of America."<sup>vii</sup>



USSOUTHCOM's Guantanamo incidents and the campaign to control the reaction to Abu Ghraib are, unquestionably, appropriate efforts to communicate U.S. actions, consistent with doctrinal definitions of strategic communications, however limited:

Focused U.S. Government efforts to understand and engage key audiences in order to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement of U.S. Government interests, policies and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages, and products synchronized with the actions of all instruments of national power.<sup>viii</sup> (JP 5-0, *Joint Operation Planning*)

Strategic communication employs information coupled with actions to better align target audience perceptions with policy goals.<sup>ix</sup> (*Guidance for the Employment of the Force*)

Synchronizing themes with actions to provide emphasis to the commander's overall goals and to persuade priority audiences... limiting the dissemination of messages that harm U.S. interests [and]...responding to these messages when they are disseminated....<sup>x</sup> (*Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan*)

According to the criteria of precipitating event and target, they constitute strategic communications at the operational level. As an effort to respond to negative messages about the United States, they are reactions to specific events within a given context, and the response plans accept the context chosen and imposed by the audience. They are targeted at challenging the information audiences used to arrive at their conclusions in these particular instances, not the analytic framework and assumptions that those audiences applied to the analysis. There is, additionally, no element of reflexivity – USSOUTHCOM focused on changing the audience's mind about our behavior, not on changing the behavior in question.

In arguing that *this use* of the restraint chair did not meet the definition of torture, and that *these activities* were a humanitarian mission, USSOUTHCOM addressed single instances of analysis, and audience beliefs related to specific U.S. actions at a given point. That is subtly, but significantly, different from challenging the cognitive assumptions that led those audiences to their first assumptive conclusions, namely that the United States probably

would employ torture, and that U.S. forces in the Dominican Republic probably had nefarious intentions. This latter approach, which would rise to the strategic level, would focus on audience expectations of U.S. actions at any given point, present or future, and concerns perceptions of U.S. credibility – or, more troublingly, a certain lack of it.

The assertion by Dunard, et. al., at the conclusion of their article, that America's positive or negative image in the world is shaped by strategic communication, is not borne out by the substance of the article. The view that the President and Secretary of Defense were successful in convincing the world that Abu Ghraib was the aberrant act of a few misguided individuals stands in stark contrast to the domestic and global dialogue of condemnation that ensued. The oft-repeated phrase '*America does not torture*' sounded unconvincing to domestic and foreign audiences alike. Or, as Joseph Nye argues: "The treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo in a manner inconsistent with American values led to perceptions of hypocrisy that could not be reversed by broadcasting pictures of Muslims living well in America."<sup>xi</sup>

These events at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib share a common theme: an argument about whether the United States did or did not employ torture. In both cases, the accusations and responses are at the tactical and operational level. They revolved around whether certain specific individuals committed certain acts, the context of those acts, the orders that may or may not have led to those acts, and the intention of the individuals involved in this specific set of circumstances. At the strategic level of strategic communications, the argument is about whether the United States would commit torture, period. When audiences believe that the United States would commit torture, these incidents are interpreted to be proof of the negative expectation. This is, in short, exactly what one

expects of the United States, because this is how it normally behaves. Any attempt to make the case that Abu Ghraib is an aberration starts out at a serious disadvantage. When audiences start from the belief that the United States respects conventions on torture and does NOT commit such acts, incidents such as Abu Ghraib are interpreted as exceptions to the rule, not the rule itself. It is thus easier to convince audiences that such an incident represents a departure from policy, rather than an intentional action or policy itself.

### **Communication Without A Strategy**

Deliberate strategic communication was not primarily responsible for shaping the image of America in the Abu Ghraib case. As Joseph Nye implies, opinions of the United States regarding Abu Ghraib were, at best, unaffected (and possibly made worse) by the President's and Secretary's efforts. Nonetheless, opinions about the United States were formed and affected. There were clearly strong and enduring emotional responses to a triggering event, processed through the cognitive framework of audience expectations. We must search for these other drivers of opinion in order to understand why strategic communication efforts did not produce the desired results.

Dunard, et. al. provide a second example of strategic communication that poses similar problems, regarding Pakistani impressions of the United States following the 2005 earthquake and U.S. efforts to provide significant humanitarian aid. The authors cite A.C. Nielsen polls in May and November of 2005, indicating improvement of Pakistani opinion of the United States. The May poll showed a favorable rating of 23% and an unfavorable rating of 48%; by November, following the infusion of significant aid, those numbers had reversed: the United States had a favorable rating of 46% and an unfavorable rating of 28%.<sup>xii</sup> Unfortunately, the effect was also transient. Follow-up polls by the same organization

conducted between April and May 2006 indicated that these numbers had again reversed, with 64% of respondents having an unfavorable opinion, and 26% a favorable opinion, of the United States.<sup>xiii</sup> Other polls by the Pew Global Forum substantiate the transient nature of the rise. While favorable ratings rose to 27% in 2007, by 2008 they had dropped below 20%; in 2008, 2009 and 2010, they ranged in the mid-teens, just as for the first half of the decade.<sup>xiv</sup>

These changes occurred independent of an intentional strategic communication effort as described by doctrine. Even the authors confess that it had almost nothing to do with a conscious strategic communications campaign: U.S. actions “eloquently illustrated American ideals and the GWOT strategic communication messages **more loudly and more succinctly than any deliberate strategic communications strategy in the previous two years.**”<sup>xv</sup> [emphasis added] The same is grimly and ironically true of the Abu Ghraib case; the messages that the audience took from U.S. actions overwhelmed all subsequent deliberate efforts to communicate policy regarding torture.

However transient or unintentional, the change in public opinion was real. In an article in *Joint Forces Quarterly* in the winter of 2009, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael G. Mullen suggested his own rationale for the improvement of Pakistani opinion. The change, he wrote, had more to do with building the kind of credibility that comes from actions, not words: “Relief efforts in the wake of natural disasters all over the world said calmly and clearly: we will help you through this....we sure didn’t need talking points and Power Point slides to deliver aid. Americans simply showed up and did the right thing because it was, well, the right thing to do.”<sup>xvi</sup> This characterization provides significant clues toward a useful direction of inquiry into where operational definitions of strategic communication fail to fully explain results of actions.

## DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

### Strategic Communication at the Strategic Level

As recently as February 2010, Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates referred to the official Department of Defense definition of strategic communication in a report to Congress.<sup>xvii</sup> In the same report, he recognized the existence of a growing debate over the meaning of strategic communication, writing that “emergent thinking is coalescing around the notion that strategic communication should be viewed as a process, rather than as a set of capabilities, organizations or discrete activities.”<sup>xviii</sup>

That effort to grapple with increasingly divergent concepts and distinguish different types of strategic communication is reflected in a presidential report to Congress, the *National Framework for Strategic Communication*. President Barack Obama refers to strategic communication as “**the synchronization of our words and deeds** as well as deliberate efforts to communicate and engage with intended audiences.”<sup>xix</sup> [emphasis added] President Obama further illuminates the division (and the definitional confusion) between levels of strategic communication, referring to strategic communications as both “(a) the synchronization of words and deeds and how well they will be perceived...[and] (b) programs and activities deliberately aimed at communicating and engaging with intended audiences....”<sup>xx</sup> In the same document, the President draws an important distinction: “Programs and activities focused on communicating and engaging with the public need to be **strategic and long-term, not just reactive and tactical**. They should focus on articulating what the United States is for, not just what we are against.”<sup>xxi</sup> [emphasis added] He further adds, “we have consciously emphasized the importance of „engagement“ – connecting with, listening to, and **building long-term relationships** with key stakeholders.”<sup>xxii</sup> [emphasis

added] Admiral Mullen reflected the same dissatisfaction and confusion in the debate over defining the topic candidly in *Joint Forces Quarterly*: “Frankly, I don’t much care for the term...[and] beyond the term itself, I believe we have walked away from the original intent. By organizing to it – creating whole structures around it – we have allowed strategic communication to become a thing instead of a process, an abstract thought instead of **a way of thinking**.<sup>xxiii</sup> [emphasis added]

Admiral Mullen’s focus on credibility and its sources begins to zero in on the criteria that differentiate the operational and strategic dimensions of strategic communications. First, he cites the value of credibility obtained through long-term relationships: “The problem isn’t that we are bad at communicating...our biggest problem [is] credibility. Our messages lack credibility because we haven’t invested enough in building trust and relationships....<sup>xxiv</sup>

This emphasizes the criticality of duration in strategic communication – credibility takes time. It also signals to operational planners and commanders the existence of a critical weakness. A lack of credibility makes it harder to succeed at communication, and thus harder to design successful communication plans that achieve their objectives and, by extension, support successfully achieving the nested operational, campaign and theatre-strategic objectives of the overall plans of which they are a critical component.

Second, he clearly indicates a preference to view strategic communication as a process and a way of thinking, rather than a toolkit: “We have come to believe that messages are something we can launch downrange like a rocket, something we can fire for effect.”<sup>xxv</sup>

As an operational toolkit, strategic communication seeks to change information within a given analytic framework. At the higher strategic level, disconnected from a specific campaign, the target of strategic communication is to change the analytic framework itself.

In the context of addressing torture at Abu Ghraib, it is the issue of whether the audience views torture as the exception, or the rule.

Third, he signals a distinction between reactive responses and the kind of continuous, initiatives not necessarily connected to a specific operation or campaign that are essential to building broad credibility: “The irony here is that we know better.... No other people on Earth have proven more capable at establishing trust and credibility in more places than we have. And we’ve done it primarily through the power of our example.... The goal is credibility. And we earn that over time.”<sup>xxvi</sup>

Lastly, he implies that there is an element of reflexiveness in strategic communication at the strategic level. Addressing the critical vulnerability of the say/do gap requires self-criticism, introspection, and modification of our behavior, not just that of the adversary: “We hurt ourselves more when our words do not align with our actions...[and when enemies] find a “say-do” gap...they drive a truck through it. So should we, quite frankly. We should be vigilant about holding ourselves accountable...and closing any gaps....”<sup>xxvii</sup>

We need only return briefly to Admiral Stavridis’ article to see the stark difference between the two streams of thought on strategic communication. Stavridis’ wrote that the purpose of strategic communication is to “provide audiences with truthful and timely information that will influence them to support the objectives of the communicator.”<sup>xxviii</sup> He refers to strategic communication as an “enabling capability for our policy.” In contrast to Admiral Mullen’s aversion to comparing messages to artillery fire, Admiral Stavridis writes that strategic communication provides information that must be “delivered to the right audience in a precise way,” and refers to USSOUTHCOM as an “area where it is necessary to launch ideas, concepts, information, conferences, viewpoints, interviews, and the many

other streams of data that constitute effective strategic communication.”<sup>xxix</sup> The term strategic communication may be used universally, but the dialogue clearly concerns two different conceptualizations of the concept.

### **Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy**

The statements of the President, Secretary Gates and Admiral Mullen furthermore mirror a dialogue about strategic communication occurring among scholars trying to sort through the muddle and define analytic models and academic tools for public diplomacy. In March 2008, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* presented a series of articles that argued for the establishment of public diplomacy as an academic field of study and opened a debate on the definition of the term and the field. In the preface to the collection, entitled “Public Diplomacy in a Changing World,” Geoffrey Cowan and Nicholas Cull define public diplomacy almost identically to strategic communication: “an international actor’s attempt to advance the ends of policy by engaging with foreign publics.”<sup>xxx</sup> Yet in a subsequent article, “Moving from Monologue to Dialogue to Collaboration: The Three Layers of Public Diplomacy,” Cowan and Amelia Arsenault echo the President, the Secretary and Admiral Mullen in distinguishing between short-term and long-term efforts: “One-way communication strategies are important at critical moments and for day-to-day explanations about policy. Sometimes they can even help to build credibility.... But it is at least as important for countries to develop communication techniques that focus on relationship-building of the kind that only dialogues and collaborations can achieve.”<sup>xxxi</sup> The definitional confusion in the realm of the practitioners is no less present in the debate among the academics. The debate on the bounds of public diplomacy, however, implies a framework that touches on similar concepts.



Cowan and Arsenault's analysis of the differences among three levels of communication – monologue, dialogue and collaboration – highlights well the spectrum of tactics and objectives with which practitioners are also grappling. At the first level, monologue, communication is one-way. Tactics employed include broadcasts, information distribution, and others like those deployed by USSOUTHCOM, and in response to Abu Ghraib. They are the tactics that Admiral Mullen describes as launching messages downrange. This is a limited form of communication, because the initiator has no idea whether the message was heard, much less believed, and does not know how the message was heard, processed, and interpreted.

The second level of complexity, dialogue, allows the initiator to gain insight into these elements and adapt his message in hopes of obtaining the desired reaction. Astute readers will see this as the distinction between the “message influence model” and the “pragmatic complexity model” of communication.<sup>xxxii</sup> The former describes a direct transfer of message between parties that is assumed to be successful unless something interferes with the transmission of the message; the latter asserts that success can also be thwarted due to differences in the cognitive frameworks of the parties, and incorporates the concept of an ongoing dialogue to resolve miscommunication of messages. In dialogue, however, the parties essentially retain their existing cognitive analytical frameworks.

The third level of communication, collaboration, exceeds dialogue in seeking not merely to obtain a correct understanding of a message, but in establishing “lasting relationships” and driving collaborative partners to develop “a better understanding of **the other.**” The parties to the collaboration are changed, profoundly, because they will be “forever bound by their common experience and/or achievement.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> The interaction, over

time, changes the cognitive analytic frameworks of the participants. This reflects the key characteristics that differentiate operational and strategic level strategic communication: engagement that occurs *sui generis*, outside the bounds of a specific triggering event; an extended duration of time not necessarily connected to a specific campaign; targeting the cognitive framework that the participants use to analyze information, not just the information analyzed; and an element of reflexivity whereby the interaction may encourage or even require behavioral change by either the communicator and the audience, or both.

Dennis M. Murphy highlights the importance of duration to distinguishing different types of strategic communication, in an article in the Winter 2009-2010 issue of *Parameters*, entitled “In Search of the Art and Science of Strategic Communication.” Along with a number of useful distinctions between the art and science of strategic communications, he writes that the art requires a far longer timeframe than the science. Timeframe figures prominently in his argument. He cites the military’s “cultural bias toward the kinetic” as a cause for misunderstanding the difference, and states that a commander “needs to overcome the false need for instant gratification that is the expected norm for kinetic measures of effectiveness.” In a discussion of culture, he recommends that the military create a “single uniformed staff function focused on local cultural understanding,” which would preserve the work of the unit over the long term as units rotate into combat areas for short deployments.<sup>xxxiv</sup> This emphasis on duration signals that strategic level strategic communication is about more than simple cultural appreciation. Duration plus reflexivity require going further than either understanding the culture of the audience, or getting the audience to adopt the communicator’s culture. Cultural understanding is a necessary, but not a sufficient, element. Ultimately, a communicator will be judged neither by how well he

understands the culture of the audience, nor by how readily an audience adopts his culture, but by how well and how consistently over time his deeds reflect and respect his words and principles.

Mullen's focus on credibility and the say/do gap and Murphy's focus on engagement over time merge in Joseph Nye's definition of public diplomacy as a function of soft power:

The resources that produce soft power arise in large part from the values an organization or country expresses in its culture, in the examples it sets by its internal practices and policies, and in the way it handles its relations with others. Public diplomacy is an instrument that governments use to mobilize these resources to communicate with and attract the publics of other countries, rather than merely their governments. Public diplomacy tries to attract by drawing attention to these potential resources through broadcasting, subsidizing cultural exports, arranging exchanges and so forth. But if the content of a country's culture, values, and policies are not attractive, public diplomacy that "broadcasts" them cannot produce soft power. It may produce just the opposite.<sup>xxxv</sup>

Credibility is the crucial resource and an important source of soft power....Politics has become a contest of competitive credibility. The world of traditional power politics is typically about whose military or economy wins.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

The modern battle, Nye writes, is about narrative, reputation, and credibility, and it is reflexive. It requires less focus on launching messages and more on understanding oneself as a messenger: "Smart public diplomacy requires an understanding of the role of credibility, self-criticism, and the role of civil society in generating soft power. Public diplomacy that degenerates into propaganda not only fails to convince, but can undercut soft power."<sup>xxxvii</sup>

The overlap of the ways and means of strategic communication at both levels complicates efforts to draw neat categorizations. One might argue that the individual efforts of the Stavridis and Dunard cases are incremental components of a larger strategy of changing expectations. Addressing accusations case by case can and does contribute to convincing audiences that the United States does not employ torture; recurrent incidents of

the United States supplying relief aid leads in time to the generalized perception that, as Admiral Mullen said it, “we will help you through this.”<sup>xxxviii</sup>

However, reliance on discrete events without due consideration for the characteristics that distinguish operational and strategic level strategic communication deprives strategic communication efforts of the coherence and intentionality needed to reach beyond the immediate operational environment. Discrete incidents may occasionally rise to the level of strategic fires, in that they go beyond the immediate theatre and give the target something new to think about. Without a commitment to sustain the efforts over time in the absence of a trigger, and to admit the need for reflexiveness – the willingness to close the say/do gap and earn the credibility of sticking to our words – those impacts are likely to be transient and subject to being undone as soon as new negative information comes in. The analytic framework will not have changed, nor will the expectations of our audience.

The boundary between the two levels is not precise, and individual cases may contain elements of both operational and strategic communication. This produces additional analytical complexity in determining how to achieve objectives. The Dunard, et. al. case of Pakistan earthquake relief highlights this difficulty. U.S. willingness to provide humanitarian relief goes beyond single events; it is something we routinely do. We have, in fact, demonstrated that we will put aside politics to do so; we have consistently offered humanitarian assistance to countries with which we have terrible relations (e.g., Iran). Goodwill wanes, however, because of problems in duration and reflexiveness. The resurgence of other political issues will compartmentalize good feelings to the limited sphere of humanitarian relief and, eventually, reinforce the belief that objectionable patterns of behavior that the audience normally expects of the United States are unchanged.

The bottom line is that while operational strategic communication may be the sum of its parts, strategic level strategic communication (where strategic communications and public diplomacy increasingly become synonymous) must necessarily be more than the sum of its parts to be credible. When we are dealing with the actual framework through which events are considered and evaluated by the individual or audience, we must not be reacting. We must engage, in the language of the literature, to determine the views, including biases and prejudices, of the individual or audience and determine where the flaws in that structure lie. We must then specifically alter those basic cognitive tools in order to regularly produce different analyses and conclusions.

Two non-military examples may help clarify the distinction. Cowan and Arsenault note the expansion of the television program *Sesame Street* program to many corners of the world as a successful example of collaboration, because non-American partners incorporate their own cultural elements and languages into the presentations.<sup>xxxix</sup> What they overlook, however, is that foreign producers must accept the Sesame Workshop model and philosophy of educational programming in order to be a program partner.<sup>xl</sup> This is the essential difference between addressing substance and altering framework. *Sesame Street* does not require that children *learn certain material*, but that they *are educated in a certain way*. Establishing an analytic framework defines in advance the content that will be acceptable and appropriate, and the results that will be produced. Congruent messages are acceptable, appropriate, and believed; incongruent messages will appear out of place or even inappropriate, and are therefore more likely to be rejected.

A final example demonstrates the key characteristics in operation, shows applicability to the broad range of strategic communications and public diplomacy activities, and suggests

avenues for future research and study. For decades, American Embassies have provided educational materials and textbooks to foreign students, to teach English and disseminate American culture. Much like operational strategic communication, these opportunities to obtain information about American culture are one-way monologues at discrete moments. Information is processed through the students' existing educational, cultural and analytic frameworks. There is little reflexivity; we want others to know and appreciate our culture, but are not really seeking ideas for changing it. American Embassies also seek to establish university partnerships and provide curriculum development expertise to governments establishing school systems. These are longer-term partnerships that seek to change the educational system itself. They import key concepts related not just to *what* Americans think, but to *how* Americans think, i.e., free inquiry, academic integrity and independence, and development of problem-solving skills vice rote learning. Accepting those models means accepting a framework through which students and professors learn, research, and process information. If, moreover, we are truly committed to the ideals just noted, then our own participation in the ensuing academic dialogue is likely to be reflexive: there is an implicit commitment to accepting the input and views of others.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The objective of communication during both military operations and diplomatic engagements is to influence opinion in a way that improves our ability and expands our opportunity to achieve important objectives. Failing to understand the characteristics that differentiate the strategic and operational level, and neglecting to determine the proper level of both the communication problem faced and the strategy proposed to address it, leads to confusion. Strategic and operational objectives may be confused or commingled. Tactics

may be applied across levels without robust consideration of the best application and the best practitioner (e.g., military or civilian) for the task. We may establish unrealistic goals or timeframes, waste time and effort, and set ourselves up for failure.

Information operations and strategic communication plays an increasing and increasingly critical role in the development of plans by practitioners across the operational level. A system for analyzing communication problems and strategies would provide them with tools to help determine whether the problems confronted and the objectives desired properly reside at the operational or strategic level. These tools would have utility and value for information operations cells of joint planning groups engaged in course of action development and analysis; for joint task forces executing operations that need public understanding and support; for joint task force staffs and commanders and combatant commanders developing guidance, evaluating plans, and choosing the most robust courses of action available. Analysts and planners should analyze strategic communications problems and plans using four questions derived from the characteristics that differentiate the operational and strategic levels of strategic communication. Is the posture we will adopt in addressing the communications issue reactive, or independent of a specific triggering event? What is the timeframe in which our efforts will occur; is it the scope of an operation or campaign, or a longer, independent timeline? Do we desire to correct information and produce a different analytic result, or are we attempting to fundamentally alter the way in which audiences analyze information by targeting the cognitive framework that produces the analytic result? Do our efforts require that we examine our own messages and behavior, and address any gap that may occur between them?

The answers to these key questions about a communication problem and the strategy proposed to address it will help practitioners to select the appropriate approach, operational or strategic. They will provide the operational practitioner with a clearer operational environment in which to select and apply the right tactics, a better understanding of the expectations that can be placed upon lines of effort, and a more realistic measure of the time required to achieve different objectives. Most importantly, practitioners will have a clearer understanding of the critical weaknesses and vulnerabilities that we carry into a strategic communication engagement, and the correct steps required to address them, in order to achieve our objectives and maintain our credibility with friend and foe alike.



## ENDNOTES

<sup>i</sup> Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Operation Planning*, Joint Publication (JP) 5-0 (Washington, D.C.: CJCS, 26 December 2006), p. II-2; and Director, Joint Warfighting Center, *Commander's Handbook for Strategic Communication and Communication Strategy, Version 2.0* (Suffolk, VA: USJFC, 27 October 2009), p. I-2. The same definition appears in Joint Publication 1-02, *The DoD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*.

<sup>ii</sup> *Commander's Handbook*, p. i.

<sup>iii</sup> Dennis M. Murphy, "In Search of the Art and Science of Strategic Communication," *Parameters* (Winter 2009-10), p. 105-116; and Christopher Paul, "Strategic Communication Is Vague, Say What You Mean," *Joint Forces Quarterly, Issue 56, 1<sup>st</sup> quarter 2010* (Spring 2010), pp. 10-13.

<sup>iv</sup> Kristin M. Lord, "Public Engagement 101: What Strategic Communication Is, Isn't, and Should Be," *Joint Forces Quarterly, Issue 56, 1<sup>st</sup> quarter 2010* (Spring 2010), pp. 6-9.

<sup>v</sup> James G. Stavridis, "Strategic Communication and National Security," *Joint Forces Quarterly, Issue 46, 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter 2007* (Fall 2007), pp. 4-7.

<sup>vi</sup> Monte Dunard, Richard Flatau, Patrick Lorge, and Dexter Sapinoso, "Strategic Communication," *Joint Center for Operational Analysis (JCOA) Journal* (Fall 2008), p. 22.

<sup>vii</sup> Dunard, Flatau, Lorge, and Sapinoso, "Strategic Communication," p. 21.

<sup>viii</sup> JP 5-0, p. II-2; and *Commander's Handbook*, p. I-2. (See footnote 1)

<sup>ix</sup> Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Guidance for the Employment of the Force, 2008-2010* (Washington, D.C.: CJCS, 2008). (Secret) Information extracted is unclassified.

<sup>x</sup> Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan 2008* (Washington, D.C.: CJCS, 2008). (Secret) Information extracted is unclassified.

<sup>xi</sup> Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (Vol. 616, March 2008), p. 101.

<sup>xii</sup> Dunard, Flatau, Lorge and Sapinoso, "Strategic Communication," p. 24. The poll was partly commissioned by the organization Terror Free Tomorrow: Terror Free Tomorrow, "Poll: Dramatic Change of Opinion in the Muslim World", <http://www.terrorfreetomorrow.org/articlenav.php?id=71> (accessed 11 October 2010).

<sup>xiii</sup> Terror Free Tomorrow, "New Polls throughout Muslim World: Humanitarian Leadership by U.S. Remains Positive," p. 13, <http://www.terrorfreetomorrow.org/articlenav.php?id=87> (accessed 11 October 2010).

<sup>xiv</sup> Various Pew Global Reports at <http://pewglobal.org>, including the *Key Indicators Database*, <http://pewglobal.org/database/?indicator=1&country=166&response=Favorable>; *Confidence in Obama Lifts U.S. Image Around the World, July 23, 2009*, <http://pewglobal.org/2009/07/23/confidence-in-obama-lifts-us-image-around-the-world/>; *Obama More Popular Abroad Than At Home, Global Image of U.S. Continues to Benefit, June 17, 2010*, <http://pewglobal.org/2010/06/17/obama-more-popular-abroad-than-at-home>; *Obama More Popular Abroad Than At Home, Global Image of U.S. Continues to Benefit, June 17, 2010*, <http://pewglobal.org/2010/06/17/obama-more-popular-abroad-than-at-home/2/#chapter-1-views-of-the-u-s-and-american-foreign-policy>; *Pakistan: Growing Concerns About Extremism, Continuing Discontent with U.S., August 13, 2009*, <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1312/pakistani-public-opinion> (all sites accessed 21 October 2010).

<sup>xv</sup> Dunard, Flatau, Lorge and Sapinoso, "Strategic Communication," p. 24.

<sup>xvi</sup> Michael G. Mullen, "From The Chairman: Strategic Communication: Getting Back to Basics," *Joint Forces Quarterly, Issue 55, 4<sup>th</sup> quarter 2009* (Winter 2009), pp. 2-4.

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- <sup>xvii</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Report on Strategic Communication, December 2009*, a report presented to the Committee on Armed Services of the U.S. House of Representatives pursuant to Section 1055(b) of the Duncan Hunter National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2009 (Washington, D.C.: February 2010), p. 1.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xix</sup> U.S. President, *National Framework for Strategic Communication*, a report presented to the U.S. Congress pursuant to Section 1055(b) of the Duncan Hunter National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2009 (Washington, D.C.: White House, March 2010), p. 1.
- <sup>xx</sup> Ibid., p. 2.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Ibid., p. 3.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Ibid., p. 4.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Mullen, *JFQ* 55, pp. 2-4
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Stavridis, *JFQ* 46. pp. 4-7
- <sup>xxix</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Geoffrey Cowan and Nicholas J. Cull, "Public Diplomacy in a Changing World," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (Vol. 616, March 2008), Preface.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Geoffrey Cowan and Amelia Arsenault, "Moving from Monologue to Dialogue to Collaboration: The Three Layers of Public Diplomacy," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (Vol. 616, March 2008), p. 16.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> S. A. Tatham, "Strategic Communication: A Primer, Advanced Research and Assessment Group" (research paper, Shrivenham, England: Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, December 2008), p. 7; and Maj Norberto R. Menendez, "Theory as Foundation for Strategic Communication Doctrine" (research paper, Newport, R.I.: U.S. Naval War College, Joint Military Operations Department, 2009), p. 15.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Cowan and Arsenault, "Moving from Monologue to Dialogue," p. 21.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Dennis M. Murphy, "In Search of the Art and Science of Strategic Communication," *Parameters* (Winter 2009-10), pp.105-116.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Nye, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power," p. 95.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Ibid., p. 100.
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> Ibid., p. 108.
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> Mullen, *JFQ* 55, pp. 2-4.
- <sup>xxxix</sup> Cowan and Arsenault, "Moving from Monologue to Dialogue," p. 24.
- <sup>xl</sup> Mr. Robert Kniecevic, Sesame Workshop, conversation with author, 2008.

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